



University of Hawaii at Manoa

Environmental Center
Crawford 317 • 2550 Campus Road
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822
Telephone (808) 948-7361

September 25, 1987
RG:0076

Mr. Edward Y. Hirata, Director
Department of Transportation
869 Punchbowl Street
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Dear Mr. Hirata:

Kaena Point Access Road
Ref. HWY-PA 2.96758

Your letter addressed to Dr. Doak Cox was brought to my attention. Dr. Cox retired in 1985, and I assumed the position of Environmental Coordinator at the Environmental Center of the University, so it is appropriate that I respond to your request for information.

It seems clear, in this instance, that the Legislature's interest in a road around Kaena Point must be balanced against substantial public opposition to such a road within the communities most directly affected by the proposed construction. We have no basis on which to quantify present public opinion on the issue, so an obvious initial suggestion is that an unbiased poll be taken within the Waianae-Mokuleia community to develop a statistically significant measure of regional public opinion.

Two separate rationales are noted in support of the Legislature's advocacy of a road around Kaena Point. In the first instance, it is postulated that such a road would provide Waianae Coast residents with an alternate escape route during emergencies. Upon critical examination, the most likely emergencies to deprive Waianae Coast residents of their normal escape route would be inundation of Farrington Highway as a consequence either of an extreme meteorological event such as a hurricane or a major tsunami. In either of these instances, a road around Kaena Point following the existing graded route would be equally subject to inundation and damage. Furthermore, the sorts of interdiction to travel imposed by such events are amenable to restoration by heavy road maintenance equipment such as is available more readily towards the population centers of Oahu. Thus, clearing and reopening of roads closed by flood and washout events in all likelihood will proceed from east to west, rendering the proposed road around Kaena Point the last to be reopened. In addition, evacuation of the area would be unwise under such emergency circumstances, since road travel is certain to pose more hazard than simply remaining at home. Medical and other isolated evacuations may be accomplished more safely by helicopter.

A Unit of Water Resources Research Center

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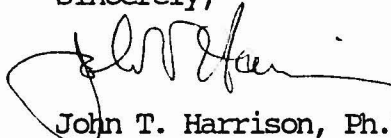
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The second rationale offered by the Legislature for the proposed road is that of an attractive scenic route for tourists and residents alike. Although it is likely some residents will take advantage of such a facility, the great preponderance of traffic will be visitors. Increased access to Kaena Point will thus necessitate a substantial increase in public support infrastructure requirements (ie., police, fire, and rescue facilities and personnel), particularly since the majority of the visitors will most likely be unaware of the hazards of rough water and currents at Kaena Point.

Finally, construction of a two lane road around Kaena Point will open up the single remaining extent of remote ocean coastline environment on the island of Oahu. Although access to a remote area may provide opportunities for widespread enjoyment of its natural beauty, habitat modification is inexorably correlated with patterns of increased human activity. Kaena Point is the last known habitat of the 'Akoko (Chamaesyce celastroides var. kaenana). This rare and endangered beach plant would not long survive the trampling of naive visitors, both tourists and residents alike. As population density on Oahu increases, the value of our remaining wildernesses grows commensurately. The benefits of another scenic route for tourists and residents are not statistically overwhelming, given the abundance of beautiful scenery available already. By comparison, loss of a unique habitat for which no substitute is available is significantly costly. The level of human activity in the Kaena Point region attendant on access by foot or bicycle is sufficient to allow for enjoyment of the area's aesthetic quality without unduly stressing the fragile ecosystem. We would recommend limitation of access to Kaena Point to foot or bicycle path in order to preserve its present environmental quality.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue. We look forward to your consideration of our views and responses to our comments.

Sincerely,



John T. Harrison, Ph.D.
Environmental Coordinator

cc: L. Stephen Lau